

The Eight Components of Christian Community Development

By Dr. Wayne L. Gordon

Nehemiah begins with lamenting over the city of Jerusalem. "Those back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates have been burned with fire." Nehemiah 1:3b. This describes the situation in parts of most American cities today. They have been neglected and allowed to deteriorate for almost forty years. The church of Jesus Christ has at best sat back and watched this happen yet in many areas has contributed to the problem. The words of Nehemiah, "great trouble and disgrace," ring true for us in the church today.

The question arises as to what the response as Christians will be to the troubles of the poor and the inner cities today. The desperate conditions that face the poor call for a revolution in the church's attempts at a solution. Through years of experience among the poor, many have come to see these desperate problems cannot be solved without strong commitment and risky actions on the part of ordinary Christians with heroic faith.

There are many philosophies to solve the problems, but most fall short of any lasting change. The most creative long-term solutions to the problems of the poor are coming from grass roots and church-based efforts. The solutions are coming from people who see themselves as the replacements, the agents, for Jesus here on earth, in their own neighborhoods and communities.

This philosophy is known as Christian Community Development, which is not a concept that was developed in a classroom, nor formulated by people foreign to the poor community. These are Biblical, practical principles evolved from years of living and working among the poor. John Perkins in Mississippi first developed this philosophy. John and Vera Mae Perkins moved back to their homeland of Mississippi from California in 1960 to help alleviate poverty and oppression. Through their work and ministry, Christian Community Development was conceived. Christian Community Development has a proven track record with over 600 models around the country making great progress in difficult communities.

Christian Community Development has eight essential components that have evolved over the last forty years. The first three are based on John Perkins' Three R's of community development: relocation, reconciliation and redistribution. (Perkins 1995, 21-22) The rest have been developed by many Christians working together to find ways to rebuild poor neighborhoods. The following is a brief description of the eight key components to Christian Community Development.

Relocation: Living Among the People

Living out the gospel means desiring for one's neighbor and neighbor's family that which one desires for one's self and family. Living out the gospel means bettering the quality of other people's lives spiritually, physically, socially, and emotionally as one betters one's own. Living out the gospel means sharing in the suffering and pain of others.

How did Jesus love? "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." (Jn 1:14) Jesus relocated. He became one of us. He didn't commute back and forth to heaven. Similarly, the most effective

messenger of the gospel to the poor will also live among the poor that God has called the person to. A key phrase to understand relocation is incarnational ministry.

By relocating, a person will understand most clearly the real problems facing the poor; and then he or she may begin to look for real solutions. For example, if a person ministering in a poor community has children, one can be sure that person will do whatever possible to ensure that the children of the community get a good education. Relocation transforms "you, them, and theirs" to "we, us, and ours." Effective ministries plant and build communities of believers that have a personal stake in the development of their neighborhoods.

Relocation is community based in the very essence of the word. There are three kinds of people who live in the community. First "relocators" are people who, like the project director, were not born in the inner city but moved into the neighborhood. Second, are the "returners." These are the people born and raised in their community and then left for a better life. Usually they return from college or the military. They are no longer trapped by the surrounding poverty of their neighborhood. Yet, they choose to return and live in the community they once tried to escape. Lastly are the "remainers." These are the ones that could have fled the problems of the inner city but chose to stay and be part of the solution to the problems surrounding them.

In 1975 the author moved into the neighborhood of North Lawndale on Chicago's West Side. This was a community, typical of most inner city neighborhoods with a high crime rate, inferior education, and abandonment by government neglect and white flight. There is no question that relocation is the linchpin of Christian Community Development and that all other principles of development draw upon for meaning.

Reconciliation

People To God

Reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel. Jesus said that the essence of Christianity could be summed up in two inseparable commandments: Love God, and love thy neighbor. (Mt 22:37-39) First, Christian Community Development is concerned with reconciling people to God and bringing them into a church fellowship where they can be disciplined in their faith.

Evangelism is very much a part of Christian Community Development. It is recognized that the answer is not just a job or a decent place to live but having a true relationship with Jesus Christ. It is essential that the good news of Jesus Christ is proclaimed and that individuals place their faith in Christ for salvation. Christian discipleship is very much a part of this philosophy also.

The gospel, rightly understood, is wholistic. It responds to people as whole people; it does not single out just spiritual or just physical needs and speak to those. Christian Community Development begins with people transformed by the love of God, who then respond to God's call to share the gospel with others through evangelism, social action, economic development, and justice.

People To People

The most segregated time of the week in our nation is Sunday morning during church services. American churches rarely are integrated and weaken the gospel because of this practice. Christians pray in the model prayer that the Lord taught: "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Mt 6:9 Churches should reflect heaven on earth, and heaven will be the most integrated place in the world. People of every nation and every tongue will worship Christ together. This is the picture of the church Christ presents to his people.

The question is: Can a gospel that reconciles people to God without reconciling people to people be the true gospel of Jesus Christ? A person's love for Christ should break down every racial, ethnic and economic barrier. As Christians come together to solve the problems of their community, the great challenge is to partner and witness together across these barriers in order to demonstrate our oneness in Christ. Christian Community Development recognizes that the task of loving the poor is shared by the entire body of Christ, black, white, brown, and yellow; rich and poor; urban and suburban; educated and uneducated. While the Bible transcends culture and race, the church is still having a hard time with living out the reality of our unity in Christ. Christian Community Development is intentional about reconciliation and works hard to bring people of all races and cultures into the one worshipping body of Christ.

This comes not so much through a program but through a commitment to living together in the same neighborhood. This is why relocation is so important and how each of the other principals builds upon it.

This is where what Dr. John Perkins calls the *felt-need concept* can be so helpful for individuals seeking to establish authentic cross-cultural relationships in under resourced neighborhoods. In order to build trust with people who may be suspicious about our motives for being in the 'hood' because of negative past experiences, stereotypes, or ignorance, we must begin by getting to know people right where they are at. As we listen to their stories and get to know their hopes and concerns for the present and future, we also begin to identify one another's deepest felt-needs; those hurts and longings that allows us opportunities to connect with people on a deeper level, which is always necessary for true reconciliation to take place.

The power of authentic reconciliation between us and God, and between people of every culture and race is an essential component of effective ministry in our hurting world.

Redistribution (Just Distribution of Resources)

When men and women in the body of Christ are visibly present and living among the poor (relocation), and when people are intentionally loving their neighbor and their neighbor's family the way a person loves him or herself and family (reconciliation), the result is redistribution, or a just distribution of resources. When God's people with resources (regardless of their race or culture) commit to living in underserved communities seeking to be good neighbors, being examples of what it means to be a follower of Christ, working for justice for the entire community, and utilizing their skills and resources to address the problems of that community alongside their neighbors, then redistribution is being practiced.

Redistribution brings the principles of Justice back to the underserved communities. Justice has left communities of color and lower economic status, leaving an unjust criminal court and prison system, unjust hiring practices, unjust housing development and injustice in the educational institutions. Justice has been available only to people with the economic means to acquire just treatment.

Redistribution brings new skills, new relationships, and new resources and puts them to work to empower the residents of a given community of need to bring about healthy transformation. This is redistribution. Christian Community Development ministries harness the commitment and energy of men, women, and young people living in the community, and others who care about their community, and find creative avenues to develop jobs, schools, health centers, home ownership opportunities, and other enterprises of long-term development.

Seeking a just distribution of resources and working for justice in underserved communities contributes greatly to helping people help themselves, which is at the heart of Christian Community Development.

Leadership Development

The primary goal of leadership development is to restore the stabilizing glue and fill the vacuum of moral, spiritual, and economic leadership that is so prevalent in poor communities by developing leaders. This is most effectively done by raising up Christian leaders from the community of need who will remain in the community to live and lead. Most Christian Community Development ministries put a major focus on youth development, winning youth to Christ as early as kindergarten and then following them all the way through college with spiritual and educational nurturing. Upon returning from college a ministry creates opportunities for exercising leadership upon their return to the community.

At the core of the leadership vacuum in inner city communities is an attitude of flight. For many, success is defined as being able to move out of inner-city communities, not remaining there. The erroneous goal is to help a few people leave the neighborhood so that they can escape the problems of inner city communities. This core value of escapism has caused a major drain on the community. Success in the world's eyes is leaving the neighborhood and owning a home in a more affluent community.

Leadership development is possible only when there is longevity of ministry. All too often people are guilty of trying to have quick fixes in poor neighborhoods. Leadership development is of the highest priority in Christian Community Development. Each ministry must have a dynamic youth ministry that is reaching young people with the good news of Jesus Christ and then equipping them to become faithful followers of Christ, and effective community leaders. This will take at least fifteen years to accomplish, so a worker must plan to stay in the neighborhood for at least that long.

In situations where Latinos and other ethnic groups are negatively affected by their current legal status in our country, this progressive, developmental process is nearly impossible to accomplish, as young people are not able to attend college or prepare for a stable career. In this case, ministries are often moved to engage in social action to challenge and change current immigration laws that debilitate the lives of promising youths and their families.

For CCD ministries, developing leaders from the community is a huge priority that requires absolute commitment; the payoff is that our communities will be filled with strong Christian leaders who love their neighbors, and have the skills and abilities to lead our churches, organizations, and other institutions that bring sustainable health to our communities.

Listening to Community

Often communities are developed by people outside of the community that bring in resources without taking into account the community itself. Christian Community Development is committed to listening to the community residents, and hearing their dreams, ideas and thoughts. This is often referred to as the felt need concept. Listening is most important, as the people of the community are the vested treasures of the future.

It is important not to focus on the weaknesses or needs of a community. Again, the *felt need concept*, as referred to earlier, helps us as community developers to focus on the desires of the community residents. The priority is the thoughts and dreams of the community itself. What the people themselves believe should be the focus. Asset-based community development focuses

on the assets of a community and building upon them. When fused together through Christian Community Development, they can have extremely positive results.

Every community has assets, but often these are neglected. When a ministry utilizes *Asset-Based Community Development* (ABCD), it names all of the assets in the community that helps the community see its many positive characteristics. It is through these assets that people develop their community.

Christian Community Development realistically points out, through community meetings and efforts, some of the areas that people in the community would like to see improved. The areas to be focused upon are not looked at from some outside group or some demographic study that is laid upon the community. Instead, it is the community members themselves that decide what area they would like to improve.

After a community has decided where they want to focus some of their attention, it is then directed to the means with which they themselves can bring this about. What qualities, talents, and abilities does the community have that can help solve these problems? The focus is on the community members seeing themselves as the solution to the problem, not some government program or outside group that is going to be their salvation.

It is essential for community leaders to help the community focus on maximizing their strengths and abilities to make a difference for their community. The philosophy of Christian Community Development believes that the people with the problem have the best solutions and opportunities to solve those problems. Christian Community Development affirms the dignity of individuals and encourages the engagement of the community to use their own resources and assets to bring about sustainable change.

Church-Based

It is the writer's position that nothing other than the community of God's people is capable of affirming the dignity of the poor and enabling them to meet their own needs. It is practically impossible to do effective wholistic ministry apart from the local church. A nurturing community of faith can best provide the thrusts of evangelism, discipleship, spiritual accountability, and relationships by which disciples grow in their walk with God. One problem today has been that the church is not involved in developing its communities. Often, the church has been an unfriendly neighbor in communities across our country. Churches are guilty of being open only on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights and being almost irrelevant to the needs of the people around them. Because of this, many para-church organizations have started to do the work of loving their neighbor that the church had neglected. Christian Community Development sees the church as taking action towards the development of its community.

It is the responsibility of the church to evangelize, disciple and nurture people in the Kingdom. Yet, from the command of Jesus, it is also the responsibility of the church to love their neighbor and their neighborhood. Churches should be seen as lovers of their community and neighborhoods. It is out of the church body that ideas and programs should emerge.

This concept is certainly not new in the black community. The black church has spawned most of the substantial community efforts in housing and economic development. There have been shopping centers built, senior housing units developed and communities transformed by the church. As natural as these transformations have been for the black church, they continue to be foreign to the traditional white church. Often, opposition to the church's involvement in community development still occurs among many white denominations and church groups.

Recently, many new efforts are also emerging in the Latino and Asian communities as well that are making the church even more relevant to those they serve.

Lastly, probably the greatest sustaining power of community development is the community building of a local church. Because Christian community is based on relocation and people living in the community, having a local church to worship together is essential. It is the church where people gather to be rejuvenated and have their personal needs met. This is true of staff members and non-staff members. How exciting it is to see doctors at a local health center worshipping and sitting next to their patients on a Sunday morning. This is community building at its best. The church helps people to understand that each person has gifts and talents and all must utilize those for the greater good of the community. A worshipping church breaks down many of the barriers including racial, educational and cultural barriers that often separate people in communities.

Wholistic Approach

Oftentimes, many in ministry get passionate and involved in one area of need and think if they solve this particular problem that all else will be resolved. Christians, of course, often focus this area on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Of course, the most essential element to Christian Community Development is evangelism and discipleship. Yet solving problems with lasting solutions is more than evangelism and discipleship.

There is never a simplistic answer to the problems in poor communities. Often, people will say that the problem is spiritual, social or educational. Of course these are problems, but they are only part of the larger problems. Solving the housing problem does not solve the emotional struggles that a person has. Christian Community Development has a wholistic approach to ministry that deals with the spiritual, social, economic, political, cultural, emotional, physical, moral, judicial, educational and familial issues of each person.

Of course, the wholistic approach is difficult because there are so many aspects to a person's life. That is why there is no better way of helping a person than having him or her committed to a local church. A church that is committed to Christian Community Development sees not only the soul of a person as significant, but also his or her whole of life on earth. It is being completely pro-life for a person, not only eternally, but also as the person lives on this earth.

Therefore, Christian Community Development sees the church must be involved in every aspect of a person's life. It is important to network with other churches and organizations in communities. In order to accomplish the wholistic aspect of ministry, pastors and leaders must be networkers. Christian Community Development builds coalitions in communities so that they can work together to solve the problems.

Empowerment

Empowering people as community developers meet their needs is an important element to Christian Community Development. How does a pastor ensure that people are able to help themselves after they have been helped? Oftentimes, Christian ministry, particularly in poor communities, creates dependency. This is no better than the federal government welfare program. The Bible teaches empowerment, not dependency.

In the Old Testament, empowerment is an important aspect to God's care for the poor. In Deuteronomy 24 and Leviticus 19, God instituted the gleaning system. The farmers harvested their crops but were only allowed to go through the field one time. What was left behind or

dropped on the ground was available for any widow, alien, orphan or poor person to come and harvest. This program was one that empowered people.

Three principles come out of God's welfare system in the Old Testament. First, there must be opportunity for people to get their needs met. In Deuteronomy and Leviticus, this happened to be a field with food in it. Secondly, the person who had a need must be willing to work for it. The widow, alien, orphan or poor person must go into the field and pick up the crops. This, then, involved work on the part of the poor. This is also found in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 which says, "If you don't work, you don't eat."

Thirdly, when these first two principles are working, a person's dignity is affirmed. All people have inherited dignity by being created in the image of God. Oftentimes, charity demeans a person and strips him or her of dignity. The last principle of empowerment affirms a person's God-given dignity.

Track Record

There are over 600 organizations in over 200 cities and forty states practicing Christian Community Development. These churches and ministries are showing that it is possible that the church can live out the love of God in the world; that black and white and yellow and brown, rich and poor together, can be reconciled; and that we can make a difference; that we can rescue the ghettos and barrios of this nation.

In these hundreds of communities and cities across the world, these defining principles of Christian Community Development are proving that grass roots, community-based ministries led by people who have made the community their own are the most effective agents for healing of the poor.

The following poem is used as a philosophical guide to those working on Christian Community Development.

Go to the people

Live among them

Learn from them

Love them

Start with what they know

Build on what they have:

But of the best leaders When their task is done

The people will remark "We have done it ourselves."

Conclusion

Clearly there are great needs in neglected inner city communities such as North Lawndale . There is a lack of leadership in these communities, and it is essential that new leadership be developed from among the people. Within the context of these communities that face a variety of cultural and environmental factors that impact the health of these neighborhoods, new leadership needs to be developed. Christian Community Development I believe, represents the best approach to not only develop these future leaders, but to transform our most under resourced communities into thriving communities through the power of God, and the efforts of His people.